The Kingdom of Heaven in its Relation to Social and Cultural Life

By

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(1) The World

CHRISTIANS, we know, have to live and work and play in the world. Our Lord Himself disclaimed any intention of praying that they might be taken out of the world. But "The World" is a very comprehensive term. What precisely do we mean by it?

In our young days we used to be taught that "the world" means "society organised apart from God." Yet St. John tells us that God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son for the purpose of saving it. It appears then to be a mixture of good and evil. Perhaps for our own purposes in the present discussion we can equate it with civilisation or culture. It is the sum total of the society in which we live. It forms the practical environment of our daily lives. Now this society is what man has made it. Every individual who has ever existed has contributed something to the civilisation and culture which we enjoy today. Indeed culture has been described as "what Man has added to Nature." In this sense not only our art and our science, our laws and our inventions, but even our very speech, has helped to form our culture.

From this a very important conclusion follows. Man himself is a tainted being. His character is deformed by sin. Whatever he does is less than perfect. Consequently, the sum total of his culture is also deformed by sin. Evil is inherent not merely in the heart of the individual, but also in society.

This is a conclusion which is often neglected by Christian preachers. They address themselves to the conversion of the individual without realising that the conversion of society is equally important and necessary. But the recognition of this fact is really an essential part of our Christianity. It is a truth which has been recovered to a large extent in our own day, and it has had a profound effect upon many of our foremost thinkers. It was the recognition of this fact that brought Professor Joad back to the Christian faith. He came to see that Christianity was the only view of human life which took adequate

knowledge of sin, and offered a way of escape from it. It was in the strength of this belief that Joad finally surrendered his agnosticism and came back to a full acceptance of the Christian faith.

The importance of this double character of "the world" can be seen if we attempt a historical analysis of the main ingredients of European civilisation. It is built up of the Greco-Roman classical civilisation with its devotion to philosophy, art and law. This complex was taken up and permeated by Christianity before it was committed to the keeping of our Barbarian forefathers from the north. Upon that richer complex was imposed modern science with all its fertility of physical analysis and invention. In all this Man's own defects are apparent. Nothing was pure, not even the Christianity, which pervaded the whole. In the recent revolutions even such measure of Christianity as there was has been dangerously diluted. This is a situation which in essence was recognised long ago. When St. Augustine described the city of this world in contrast with his City of God, he recognised the ambiguous character of society and saw that it contained good as well as evil elements. It is evident that Man through the centuries has never been able to rid himself of his fatal facility for spoiling the work of his own hands.

Two examples from our own history serve to illustrate this truth still further. During the period of the Industrial Revolution in the early part of the nineteenth century great wealth was made available for the people of this nation, yet an untaught and unbridled capitalism contrived to pour this wealth into the pockets of comparatively few, while leaving the bulk of the rapidly increasing population in poverty and misery. Again today, when we might have thought that we had learned our lesson, many moralists are exclaiming against the misuse of the benefits of the Welfare State. It is alleged that an unbridled socialism is encouraging some elements of society to appropriate the benefits offered, while escaping as far as possible from making any adequate contribu-

tion in the way of service in return. It is alleged that even the young people in our clubs and settlements will refuse to do anything to help themselves, in the belief that Government or some other outside source will provide everything that is needed for their enjoyment. The phrase "THEY will provide" has in effect taken the place of the Old Testament saying "The Lord will provide."

(2) **The Kingdom**

In sharp contrast to this idea of the world is the concept of the Kingdom as proclaimed in the New Testament. The Kingdom is what is known as an eschatological conception. That is to say, it has to do with the end. This does not, however, mean, as it is often taken to do, that it has to do with the end of the world, chronologically conceived. The end in the biblical sense is not a date, but a fulfilment. We must get rid of the naive conception that the world will run for a certain number of years and then will be replaced by the Kingdom. The fact is, that the end in this sense is itself an age, or, as it used to be called by the old theologians, a dispensation. We have to think of different ages overlapping each other. The Kingdom was introduced by Christ. It came in His Person, and in embryo is already here. It overlaps this present age. The present age is this world with its mingled good and evil. The age of the Kingdom is the world to come, or that is already coming, the sphere of God's acknowledged rule. This also will have an end when Christ has won His final victory, and, as St. Paul said, has handed over the Kingdom to God the Father. Then the third and final age will begin, that of the world without end.

The position then for the Christian is, that he lives in two ages, in two societies, in two worlds. He is a member of the old order of existence, but he is also a member of the new order, which came in with Christ, and is gradually changing the old order into itself. Because he is a Christian his true home is in the new order. He is, as St. Paul again said, merely a "colonist" in the old order. His energies have been enlisted on the side of he

Kingdom in all its conflict with the evil in the old order.

It is important to realise that the Kingdom embraces all the interests of mankind. This applies not only to his specifically religious interests, but to his work and to his recreation. It includes not only the hour he spends in church on Sunday and the moments he spends at his prayers night and morning, but his activities in office, workshop and factory, the occupations of his leisure hours and his efforts to frame satisfactory laws and regulations by which his communal life shall be controlled.

Anyone who has seen Christian missions at work must have recognised this transformation in action. Civilisation characteristic of the stone age is transformed with amazing rapidity as the learning, the science, the inventions, the economy, of European civilisation are introduced. Where this is dictated by a definitely Christian love, the characters of men are equally transformed with their environment. Personality becomes richer, horizons are wider, motives are purer. The pattern of the Kingdom of Heaven can be seen emerging, faintly no doubt, but none the less truly, against the background of individual and communal life. If the process is most clearly evident in the mission-field, it should also be discernible in the conditions of European civilisation itself. As people realise the character of the Kingdom and give themselves to its purposes, the pattern of society can be seen to conform more and more closely to that of the Kingdom of God.

There are two spheres in which this can be seen, two instruments by which it can be accomplished.

(3) **The Individual**

The first of the two is human personality. Ever since Jeremiah and Ezekiel first disentangled the individual from the solidarity of the nation, and made clear that each man is a responsible entity in the sight of God, the Judeo-Christian tradition has placed tremendous emphasis on the human person. It is true that in our own time under the influence of Fascist and Communist teaching we have seen this emphasis in large part obscured, and people have

been encouraged to merge their own identity in that of the nation. Nevertheless the Christian tradition remains secure and comes out all the more clearly in contrast to the modern systems.

We must see to it that personal values are not lost in our own more moderate reform of society. Nothing could be less like the Christian ideal of manhood than the economic man who forms the unit of much sociological investigation today. Where the Kingdom is allowed its proper impact upon society the individual is secured sufficient freedom for the development of his own character.

Schweitzer says that for the development of personality a certain modest comfort is necessary. In so far as the Welfare State secures that comfort it is helping forward the true interests of humanity. Not only must there be certain modest comfort, but there must be an adequate measure of freedom. The idea of the wage slave has vanished from modern discussions because people are better paid and have more leisure than they had in the old days. Our difficulty is to see that people use their leisure aright for the encouragement, and not for the impoverishment, of their personality. The more highly specialised and mechanical men's work becomes, the more necessary it is that they should have a rich employment for their spare time. They ought, of course, to be taught to understand the whole plan of their work so that they can have a proper appreciation of the often minute operations that they themselves have repeatedly to perform. But they should be encouraged, not only to understand the full operation of the trade or profession in which they are engaged, but they should be helped to develop such other skills and talents as they possess, so that they shall have, not a dwarfed or warped, but an all-round development. Only so can they be the men that God intended them to become.

Only too often the natural desire for self-expression degenerates into a mere pursuit of happiness. It has been assumed in many important pronouncements that every human being has a right to happiness, and consequently

many people in our own generation have set themselves deliberately to pursue their own particular pleasure without regard to the needs or feelings of others. It cannot too often be emphasised that happiness cannot be found in that way. Happiness is not a goal to be aimed at; it is a by-product. It comes to us not as we are pursuing our own selfish ends, but as we are giving ourselves to a worthy task, which absorbs our thoughts and our energies. He who deliberately seeks his own happiness is likely to lose it.

We should find happiness a more common experience if, as individuals, we had a better doctrine of work. Fundamentally our aim should be to assist in preparing the way for the coming of the Kingdom of God. Our work in the world is a part of that main task. The workman who takes a delight in his work, and does it conscientiously, is imitating the Artificer of the Universe, who is described from the first page of the Bible to the last as a worker. The industrialist who is organising a vast concern on the best possible lines to avoid waste and keep chaos at bay, is doing in his own sphere what the Sustainer of the Universe does in His, when having brought existence out of chaos He maintains the planets in their courses. The housewife attending to the same household chores day after day, keeping her home in order and bringing up her children aright, is equally entering into the very heart and mind of the God Who made us and leads us to Himself. Work is to be seen, not as a daily task, undertaken merely in order to earn a competence and to be got rid of at the earliest possible moment, but as a sharing in the age-long task of the Creator. It should be done with skill and delight, and brought as near perfection as possible. This is the doctrine of work which characterises the Kingdom. It gives every man a pride in what he does, and guarantees that he will do it to the best of his ability. By so much is the Kingdom advanced.

Further than this the Kingdom plants a vivid hope in every human breast. It points to an ultimate goal. Here is something to look forward to. This is the ideal perfec-

tion which everyone longs for, even if he is only half conscious of that longing. It means that our life is not confined to the period between the cradle and the grave. It assures us that all we do and strive for is not intended to be destroyed. It means that no life dedicated to the purpose of the Kingdom will be cast as waste upon the void, but that all will be caught up into the purpose of God. It is this, and this alone, that can give an adequate meaning to life.

And this hope is not a mere pious aspiration. It is a creative energy. Once a man recognises it he is galvanised into activity. He is strengthened against disappointment, and urged forward to overcome repeated difficulties. When the early disciples of Our Lord conceived this hope they became new men. The one characteristic of the followers of Jesus that struck their contemporaries was that they were men of power. However we may explain or fail to explain the many narratives of miracles, signs and wonderful works of that early period, it is quite obvious that a new power had come into the world. Life was lived with a greater intensity by the followers of Jesus than by their contemporaries of the ancient world. If we can only grasp the reality of the Kingdom, surely the same characteristic will be seen in our own case today.

At any rate it is obvious that this must be our starting-point. The Kingdom of God is primarily the rule of God in men's hearts and lives. It is the individual who must be the first instrument in preparing the way for the Kingdom. It is in the allegiance of the individual heart that the Kingdom must have its primary extension. It is here that each of us must begin.

(4) **The Church**

The other instrument in preparing the way for the coming of the Kingdom, is the Church. We are often told that ours is " the age of communal man." If the whole of society is to be regenerated it must be not only by the actions of individuals, but by the action of a group within society. We have the highest authority for believing that Our Lord will use the Church, which is His Body, as His

instrument in the salvation of society, and we shall find our own individual efforts increased in value a hundred-fold as we contribute them to the total effort of the Church.

It should be clear that the Church is not itself to be identified with the Kingdom. The Kingdom, as I have already explained, belongs to a wider range of interests than those that are purely ecclesiastical. It stretches out beyond the confines of the Church building, beyond even the limits of the Church organisation, into every place where the claims of God are recognised.

The Church is the nucleus of the Kingdom. It works like the cells in the human body, or, to use Our Lord's own metaphor, like the yeast in a mass of dough. It works as a society within society, gradually permeating more and more of its environment, suffering from time to time stoppages and set-backs for one reason and another, but destined ultimately to permeate the whole.

In St. Paul's philosophy of history the Church is seen as the organisation to envelop all other organisations. In it all barriers are broken down. He uses his unforgettable illustration of the wall erected in the Temple of Jerusalem to divide the Court of the Jews from the Court of the Gentiles, on which a notice is affixed threatening the penalty of death to any Gentile who passed its limits. This, he said had been destroyed in Christ. Henceforth Jew and Gentile were to be one. If we were one with Christ, then we were one with each other. Neither age, nor sex, nor class, nor race, nor nationality could divide us.

We are still very far from seeing the full effect of the teaching. Nevertheless it is the Church's abundant duty to work for its recognition. We must continue for instance to labour for the breaking down of the colour-bar, whether in our own country or elsewhere. We may indeed be ready to recognise the inexpediency of trying to put all races immediately upon the same social, economic, political level, but we can never rest content until they are ready and able to share privileges and responsibilities alike. We can never acquiesce in the permanence of any barrier, and we must do our utmost to hasten the time when we can all truly live as one.

Precisely the same argument holds in the sphere of European unity. The Church is not a political factor. Its leaders do not profess to be experts in questions of trade and defence, but their whole influence must be directed towards the ultimate attainment of a real unity in which there will be the freest possible interchange both on the material and the spiritual level.

It would be easier to press this argument if the representatives of Christianity were united among themselves. Here the existence of barriers is a greater scandal than in the secular sphere. So long as they are recognised as a scandal there is hope that they will be surmounted. The present Œcumenical Movement is a valiant effort to prepare the way for the breaking down of these ecclesiastical barriers. It must clearly enlist the sympathy and cordial co-operation of all who have the interests of the Kingdom at heart.

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In all these ways the I.C.F. is bearing its own witness in support of the ideals of the Kingdom. In one particular sphere, the relations between employer and employee, it has done gallant service in trying to destroy such barriers as remain, and to lead the whole great world of industry into one communion and fellowship. Ideally this would not be necessary if the whole Church were fully apprised of the need for this work; but always it is necessary in the pursuit of any interest to have some body of people who are specially devoted to its purposes. The I.C.F. not only does its own work within the sphere of industry; it keeps alive in the minds of Church people as a whole their responsibility for this fundamental task. It is indeed one of our greatest illustrations of the right relations between the Kingdom of God and social and cultural life.

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